

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Hey pals, forgive me for breaking the fourth wall. This podcast doesn't really have one. I'm presenting to you an episode that was recorded over a month ago now. I recorded my conversation with Amy and my opening essay a couple days before my dad died, and I've been off work on and off since then. I think this episode is important, and I think what Amy explains is really useful. So I'm going to release the episode as is with this little disclaimer that the audio is about a month old and the bargaining process has probably moved to a different space and I'm definitely in a different space. But I think it's worth listening to anyway. So on with the show.

Hello and welcome to You Got This!, a podcast about teaching, learning, community, conversation in your digital life made for everyone at Thompson Rivers University. I'm your host, Brenna Clark Gray Coordinator of Educational Technologies, and this podcast is a project of your friends over at Learning Technology and Innovation. We're housed within Open Learning, but we support the whole campus community. I record this podcast in Tk'emlups te Secwepemc, within the unseated, traditional lands of Secwepemcú'ecw, where I hope to learn and grow in community with all of you. And this week I'm thinking about how the robots are going to destroy us all. That's right. Let's get into it.

So if you follow any of the post-secondary press, and particularly if you hang out on higher ed Twitter, which I'm not sure, I recommend, to be perfectly honest, you'll know that the boogeyman of the month is AI generated essays. Essays that are generated by artificial intelligence to a prompt. They're pretty good now. We must have always known they were going to get pretty good, but they are at this point in time pretty good. This is causing much hysteria, particularly in the education for scale crowd, people who advocate for very, very large classes. And the argument in that context is, well, this is the death now of the essay. Well, we can't do essays anymore because students can generate AI essays. It's going to shock and surprise you that I have some more nuance to offer this conversation than that. I think there's two things we need to think about when we think about how artificial intelligence functions in the university.

The first is that we subject students to AI all the time, or at least to machine learning. So things like the ACCUPLACER language test, which has its first pass done by an AI reading service. There's lots and lots of courseware out there that evaluates students without them having any kind of contact with it. And the thing that gives me the most anxiety, I have to say, are things like learning analytics that use machine learning to make conclusions about our students based on their behaviors within the course space. And no, it's not in Moodle, don't worry. Moodle have learning analytics, but they are what I like to call nice and dumb. They don't make conclusions, they just offer data. I don't love the data part, but at least they're not telling you that a student is a problem. So that is one piece of AI. Our students are already subjected to it all the time.

The other thing about AI that I think is really important to remember is that we've trained it ourselves in a lot of ways as a sector. The kinds of content that go into the databases that are then used to generate the AI essays, they come from stuff that we fed them. Whether it's plagiarism detection services or other functions by which our students intellectual property is uploaded into the internet as a data for who knows what purpose. It goes somewhere. So I guess what I'm fascinated about is the outrage, like the leopard eating faces party. I voted for them, but I didn't expect them to eat my face. AI is the leopard eating face party, and we invited it into the university in so many different ways because we're so primarily focused as a sector on scale, on making courses as big as they can be, on making teaching loads as heavy as people can handle.

And on creating these precarious and negative working conditions. We devalued university teaching. We devalued it to the point that many students engage with their subject material primarily through for-profit courseware that they pay for that generates their assignments and their assessments. And were

surprised when students might respond to that environment by using an AI tool to generate assignments. I don't know, seems like a push to be upset about it now. My favorite way to use these AI tools, by the way, is as a teaching tool. If you have access to one of these artificial intelligence machine learning essay generating functions, I encourage you to work with your class, put the prompt in, see what it spits out, and then carve it up. Treat it as you would any piece of sample student writing. What's good, what's bad, what does it know how to do, what does it not, and how does it fail to meet the terms of the assignment you've set?

And if it doesn't, might be time to talk about assessment design, because if your assignment is contextual to your student population connecting with the specific things that you and your students talk about week to week, I don't think AI knows you. The robots are coming folks. The robots are coming and the robots are going to destroy us all. But there are pedagogical solutions to all technological problems, and that's something that I am always happy to have a chat about. Someone who is not a robot and is not going to destroy us all is my guest today. Amy McLay Patterson is here to talk, not in her role as a librarian, although everyone who listens to this show knows that I do love a librarian. Amy's going to talk to us about the bargaining process and her role as the lead of the bargaining team. Can't think of anybody better for it. I'll let Amy take it from here.

I am here today with Amy McLay Patterson. Amy, would you introduce yourself and talk a bit about your role on campus?

Amy McLay Paterson:

Sure Brenna, so in my day job on campus, I am the assessment and user experience librarian at the TRU Library. But most of you will know me in my capacity as the VP of the Salary and Working Conditions' committee of TRUFA and our lead bargainer for this latest round of negotiations.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

And indeed, that is why I have invited you here today. Not that I don't love a good library story, but I'm really interested from a position of naive ignorance about the sort of bargaining process and what you do with the union. I've always been sort of aware of union activity at my place of employment, supportive of it, attended meetings when I can, but I've never really gotten involved. So I'm wondering if you could start by telling us a bit about what your role is in the union and then maybe we can talk about bargaining. What is it?

Amy McLay Paterson:

Sure. Actually, my role in the union started about a year after I got here, and I've had a number of roles in the union leading up to this. I started off as just a representative to the salary and working conditions committee and also a shop steward where we deal with problems related to the collective agreement. I've also been in the past the performance review coordinator. So I sat in for two years on basically every performance review for faculty that existed at TRU. And then I gave up that role when I took on the position of the vice president of the Salary and Working Conditions committee. So with that, not only do I lead the contract negotiations, but I also sit as what we call a table officers, which is the union president and the vice presidents. We meet usually every week to talk about union response to ongoing issues at the larger level.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So when I found out you were going to be leading the negotiations, I was delighted to hear it. Amy, you've long been one of my favorite people to be in a meeting with because you will always say the

quiet part loud. And you make sure that concerns are on the table and that people are speaking to the same point, a good skill to have, and you do it gracefully. But it's also, I would imagine a really excellent thing to have in the bargaining room too. So I see you as someone who has an affinity for this kind of work. What led you to become so involved in the union and what drives your participation?

Amy McLay Paterson:

Oh, that's interesting. I've started moving into a mindset where I've seen myself up until now as more coming at it as an underdog and making sure that my voice is heard and having to say the thing basically. And over the past couple years particularly, I've tried to transition that as moving into a leadership responsibility. Because I'm feeling like people are listening to me and weirdly, that carries more weight when you open your mouth and say the thing that nobody's saying. So I've tried to retain the willingness to, I hope, speak truth to power when necessary, but I have to move into, in talking about this role in the union. The consideration of what I'm speaking for is really a collective good. And there's a large thought process because what I say, it really does affect all of our TRUFA members and all of the union members.

And I took it on because I don't want to be the type of person who just makes a complaint or is dissatisfied with how things are going and then just cuts and leaves. I want to really take a leadership role in moving the things that aren't working the way that they should be or the things that I'm hearing from people and moving that into making things better. And obviously, as you've noted, I have opinions about things and I like to say the things. And so here I am, and this is honestly leading the bargaining, it's something I'd never thought that I would be in. And it's definitely one of the, scratch that, the biggest challenge and the biggest honor that I've ever experienced in my career and that it's not sitting lightly. But I'm enjoying that I get to be in this role and I do take it very seriously, the effect that it's going to have on our TRUFA members.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

It's really, I don't know, it's moving to hear you speak of it as a responsibility that you're taking along because you are representing us collectively. I don't want to push too far into what goes beyond what should be spoken about in an open forum like this. But I am really curious about the process of bargaining. What does it look like? I've only ever voted on it, eventually. Voted on the agreement, but I've never, and I don't think I'm alone in having a lot of, I don't know, kind of a haze of mystery around the process of how all of this works.

Amy McLay Paterson:

One of the reasons why I was really excited to do this is because I don't think you're alone in that. And I think I definitely would've been someone who saw it as shrouded in a haze of mystery before I got involved in it myself. And I'm glad to be able to communicate that to more people. Bargaining, there's a number of different ways that we can do it, but what's been going on so far is mostly the pre bargaining where our team has been assembled for about a year now, and we've put together a full package of language that we have now submitted to the employer. So that would be, we did the survey, we did department school visits, we looked in stewards to see what the problems were. We got emails from individual faculty members suggesting things, and we took all of that, sometimes contradictory wants and needs. And we assembled that into first a platform and then finally a bargaining package that attempts to please about, I think it's 600 to 700 different faculty members in the union.

So where we're at at this point is we've signed a protocol agreement, which just gives some rules of the playing field. It's mutually agreed on with the employer of how bargaining is going to go. We've gone through some housekeeping items, which are just, where there's typo's, things cleaning up in the

collective agreement that we can both agree on. And where we're at now is just this past week we've started substantially bargaining the packages. So we've seen their package and they've seen ours. And the reason why that's only just started is because in British Columbia, public sector bargaining is mandated at a provincial level.

So some of the bigger unions such as BCGU, or HEU tried to settle first and BCGU actually just ratified their agreement yesterday. It was ratified by the membership, so voted on. And it passed by the skin of its teeth, 53%. BCGU, they did a lot for us and they got us a mandate that I think faculty members here are going to be happy with, but they did a really good job communicating the problems to their members. And they created this really engaged membership that was really invested in making sure that the people in the union who were struggling were pleased with this package.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I'm fascinated by this part of the process because you know, you guys, as the bargaining team, you must go into the process with the best of intentions and trying to achieve the best that you can for the membership. And when you say something that could make everybody happy, it's a wild thing to even attempt with so many people at different career stages and with different expectations of what the university should be and do and offer. But you can get through that whole process and have ratification fail. So it's a huge series of checks and balances, but also it's a huge investment of yourself in a process that you don't necessarily have any guarantees about the outcome of.

Amy McLay Paterson:

Yeah, I had this thought when I was putting together the platform that taking 700 people worth of feedback and trying to fit it into these are the issues that are rising to the top. It's never going to please everybody. But one of the great things about TRUFA as a union actually is I think that there are faculty members of many different career stages all put into this pot together, and we all work by the same processes. So a lot of faculty unions, for example, they don't include sessionals. And contract faculty, they have their own union. But TRUFA we do right there with tenured full professors are our sessionals and we're all working together. And western society emphasizes more individualistic modes of being. And we get a lot of that in our mindsets going forward. And unions are a bit of a counter to that. They're a reminder that what we're acting for here is not just our individual good, but it's our collective good and that our individual goods are improved with the betterment of that collective good.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I love that. The notion of a union is an idealistic thing. It's this idea that people can come together and bargain for something that might not be the perfect package for every individual, but it's the best package for the most number of people. It's hard not to feel heartened by that sentiment. I don't want to put you on the spot to speak more than you are comfortable at this stage of the bargaining, but can you speak thematically maybe to some of what TRUFA is asking for in this round?

Amy McLay Paterson:

Actually, I can, and this is really good timing that we are doing this interview now because last week I couldn't have, because you could have listened and got a preview of our package, but now they've seen it. So I can tell you thematically, all of our sort platform priorities. So normally salary and benefits are the biggest two concerns of members. And salary still is. Workload was actually the second most concern of members this round. So we have at the top, we have salary, then we have fair workload. And by the way, these aren't in priority order. Or actually when I looked at them more in a cost to non cost

order. So there's salary, there's fair workload, access to benefits. And this is a big one because I don't know if everyone's aware that there are TRUFA members that don't have access to health benefits, our sessionals.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I didn't know that.

Amy McLay Paterson:

Yeah. Our university instructors do, but our sessionals do not. And I think coming out of the COVID pandemic, we emphasized how important this is. And not only access to these extended health benefits. But also to do other benefits that we get such as compassionate care leave and bereavement leave, which are important for caring for each other. So there's that access to necessary benefits. There is research, so TRU is moving into centering research as important, and in order for that goal to succeed faculty members, they need the time and they need the funds to devote themselves to research. TRU always talks about recruitment and retention concerns. And we think that that's a huge concern in that area as well. Collegial governance, there's some items that we think will improve some processes for the mutual benefit of us and the employer. And then equity and indigenization.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

You can see the ways in which there are components of the platform that actually are like, you and I just went through the integrated strategic planning process. There's language there that is very complimentary to what we've come to see as the outcomes or the priorities emerging out of that ISP process. Is that part of it? Aligning goals between what the institution wants to achieve and what the workforce needs to do that?

Amy McLay Paterson:

I think that can be part of it, and that can also be a conflict too, because the union goals aren't always the institution goal. But what we have to remind ourselves is that we do at the very, very top level, have the same goal, which is to make TRU a better educational institution. And the conflict comes when the employer and when the union have different ideas of either what a better educational institution would look like or the ways that we get there. I think there are definitely some commonalities between what we've suggested, but often there's different processes because I think that often, it's our duty of care and loyalty to protect all the members of our union and to do it in a collective way. Before this interview, because I wasn't sure what you were going to ask, I was looking again at a book I read recently, David Graeber, *The Dawn of Everything*.

It's not specifically about unions of course, but it talks about inequality and how we're sort taught to think that inequality is normal and natural. But there are societies that are arranged in a different way. There's a line that I have written down here that there are types of societies and he mentions indigenous societies, particularly some of them, "It was not so much that they feared poverty themselves, but rather that they found life infinitely more pleasant in a society where no one else was in a position of abject misery." And I like to think of that as our union goal to make us all better, make TRU better by making sure that people in the least advantageous position are taken care of.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

I really like that, and I think it speaks to a necessary set of collective values that I think have become maybe noisier coming out of the pandemic. A desire among lots of people, I think to see more of us

taken care of. And the pandemic's echoing in my mind because I'm intrigued at workload leaping to the top of concerns this time around. And I'm wondering if you think that has to do with the amount of labor extended during particularly the remote teaching year. And whether or not this is a sort of connected to a larger sector wide issue of burnout and sort of faculty exhaustion.

Amy McLay Paterson:

Oh, I have so many thoughts on that. Yeah, no, I definitely think that's part of that. I think at a basic level, part of it is we made a lot of improvements to benefits last time and people are actually pretty happy with the current benefits package. But I think workload certainly is a concern because the pandemic maybe didn't burn people out, but as much as made them realize that what they were doing was unsustainable. I think that people are noticing the ways that the scope of a lot of duties have crept up it. It's not just teaching classes anymore, particularly in a research institution, people are supervising grad students and directed studies. And not always, depending on the department getting workload credit for that. There's been elevated amounts of service that's expected in my librarian life. I recently also came off of a research project interviewing librarians nationwide about workload experiences during COVID.

And I think this has applications for other academics as well, but what we saw was the work moving from a less visible role to maintaining infrastructure behind the scenes. So instead of teaching more classes, there was more work in preparation for these online classes. And making sure that the infrastructure sustaining education was just really, really good and working even as more was added on. And the work is less visible, but it's just more effort and more burdensome. And I think we're seeing that all over the academic sphere, and I think that's showing up in this bargaining process. People are less willing to accept this narrative that they just fall over themselves for their jobs, that academic labor is labor. And labor needs to be compensated and rewarded.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

That aligns, I think with a lot of what I'm seeing in research and faculty support and how the kind of vocational thread losing its charm. The idea that like, "Oh, I was born to do this work and it's my calling." Which is a really good way to find yourself being taken advantage of. Whereas looking towards more, thinking about it more in terms of labor and labor relations I think is that's important just in terms of equity and fairness and seeing people appropriately rewarded for the work they do.

I have a question that's like sidelong to bargaining, and you can defer if you want. But you've mentioned a couple of times this move towards the research universities. We've seen this new strategic priority around the hiring of 200 tripartite faculty in particular as a measure of what are we calling it, inclusive excellence. And I just wonder, we've seen two tiered faculty compliments develop at a lot of institutions. At TRU, there are currently a lot of bipartite faculty. I wonder if the union has any concerns around service and workload and the seeming rise of the use of sessionals if we move towards this more tripartite hiring model without changes to the way we structure courses.

Amy McLay Paterson:

I think we have many concerns about that. We do have good faculty compliments language to ensure that our universities are not turned into, overrun by sessionals except for research faculty. We do have some basic protections against that kind of two tiered system. We are certainly a little concerned because when we have this tripartite and bipartite, what we see it as in the union is these are two types of ways that people want to focus their labor. It's not better to be in the research stream. It's not better to be in the teaching stream. It's just ways that people help communicate their academic expertise.

So there is some concern, of course, that moving over more towards a research type university that that essential teaching labor is going to be taken for granted. But I know that there are a lot of bipartite faculty members right now that would like to see themselves moving over to research. And I think there's a number of different ways that we can explore to do that. I think that our lesson coming out of COVID in particular, when we're all naturally living towards more flexibility of work. That helped both the institutions and the members. I think we need to be looking at this going forward, what is going to work for each of our individual members as well as the collective in ways that they impart this educational expertise. That is what ultimately unionize us.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Yeah, I really like that. I would love to hear a stronger sense from the plan side of things that increase in the research faculty compliment doesn't have to just be this language they're using around Net New. Our universities are so obsessed with hiring new people from far away, rather than looking at what we can do for folks who are present as the university is shifting and how they might choose to shift their roles or not.

Amy McLay Paterson:

I will say that the indications that I've seen from TRU is that they're not necessarily looking to fulfill these tripartite positions from outside. I think that they are, it is on their minds that they do have people already working here who are hired into bipartite positions that might be interested and eager to participate in that side of the academic mission as well.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, that's interesting. That's kind of heartening. I always feel like whether it's when we're hiring outside consultants or we're, I don't know, establishing COVID policy. I always think to what extent are we looking within our walls at the expertise that's already on site. So it's heartening to hear you say that.

Amy McLay Paterson:

Well, I think when we looked at a lot of indigenization initiatives going into our platform and the bargaining process. One of the items that's normally suggested is this abolishing of the traditional 40 40 20 teaching research service, which I guess would be for bipartite and, or sorry, tripartite. And at TRU, of course, it's 80 20 teaching professional role service for bipartite people. The way that the roles work and the way that things are needed don't always conform to those specific numbers. And some people it makes sense for there to be more service. And again, we hear that from indigenous faculty because of the obligations and the duty of care for their community can't be sort of summed up in 20% service. And I guess it's hard to make an overarching collective agreement policy on those kinds of things that's going to work for everybody. But ultimately, and I don't know if it'll happen this round, I hope that we can sort of move towards a future where everybody has room to flexibly find their place in our academic mission.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Oh, I love that Amy. It's a nice place to end our conversation honestly. This was both super enlightening for me and also I think you've given me a sense of well, confidence in the process. I genuinely cannot think of anybody I would rather have in this role in this moment than you. So thank you for agreeing to serve in this capacity, and thank you for joining me on the podcast today to talk about it.

Amy McLay Paterson:

Oh, I really appreciate that. Thank you, Brenna.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

Take care.

Amy McLay Paterson:

You too.

Brenna Clarke Gray:

So that is it for season three, episode seven of You Got This! As always, if you want to write to us, you can email me, I'm bgray@tru.ca. And I'm also on Twitter @brennacgray. In both cases, that's Gray with an A. All our show notes and transcripts are posted at yougotthis.trubox.ca. And of course you can always comment on individual episodes there.

I'm going to leave you today with a Tiny Teaching Tip, and my Tiny Teaching Tip is I really encourage you to get informed about the ways in which machine learning and artificial intelligence are already here. Oftentimes by the time we come across these kinds of essays that we see published in places like Chronicle of Higher Education, it's like hysteria fest. Instead of thinking about how this is an unfortunate natural progression of some of the choices that we've made in the classroom. And I don't mean we on the individual level, I'm talking sector wide here. I'll link some essays you might want to check out, including one by yours truly, in the show notes for today. And hopefully that'll be a good jumping off point for you to think about this a little more with a little less hysteria. Take care of yourselves, take care of each other. Man, don't fear the robots. They're already here. Bye bye.